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THE EVOLUTION OF PRAYER

BY ELLEN BURNS SHERMAN

“More servants wait on man than he'll take note of.”—SHAKESPEARE.

“The reason why we do pray is simply that we cannot help praying.”—
PROFESSOR JAMES.

It has been rumored, in public and privately, that the present generation does not believe in prayer. Yet, without an accurate and somewhat awkward canvass by a census-taker, one cannot know how large a percentage of the accused generation would plead guilty to the indictment.

If all the clergymen of the United States should gather statistics, more light might be shed upon the matter. Yet such data would give no information concerning the devotional habits of other sheep not of the church-fold, sheep who are sometimes quite as devout as those within the highest ecclesiastical palings. If, in addition to such statistics as clergymen could gather, the secular press should poll the confessions of all its readers not in the church, there might be collected a body of evidence worthy of respectful attention. Meantime, in his own private circle, everybody who is so disposed may collect on the subject such facts as he may gain by the tactful indirections of courtesy. Yet, without exact figures as a basis of conclusions, one is safe in saying that the present generation falls into three classes: those who have no faith in prayer, those whose prayers are so perfunctory that they seem a travesty on real prayer, and those whose prayers are inspired by a vital, evolving faith.

Among those of the first class, there are some who will say that they believe in the kind of prayer that one answers himself. This is a very good kind of prayer—as far as it goes—and the men and women who use it are sometimes of the salt of the earth. This interpretation of prayer, however, covers only a small fraction of the vast possibilities of prayer as it is understood by those whom it has evolved.

There are finer prayers than one knows how to make or answer himself. Moreover, if one learns to walk by walking, or to talk by talking, he must as surely learn to pray by praying, unless his prayers are as mechanical as the music of a phonograph. Hence the man who does not believe in prayer cannot speak as authoritatively on the subject as one who does. One does not ask a man who knows nothing of chemistry to write a treatise on the chemical possibilities of ultra-violet rays. And just as surely as one learns to pray by praying, the idea of prayer, following the change in the idea of God, must change and grow, unless it should unfortunately prove to be the one thing in the universe to escape the law of evolution. That it has not escaped that law one may discover by comparing with the prayers of to-day some of the abject and groveling petitions of an earlier age when Jehovah was almost exclusively a God of wrath.

How very much some prayers needed the beneficent influence of evolution is made painfully clear in a little volume by Elizabeth Rowe, published in 1836. One of the petitions of this "pious and ingenious" lady, as the preface calls her, runs in this wise:

"O Lord God, permit a poor worthless creature to plead a little with Thee. What honor will my destruction bring Thee? What profit, what triumph to the Almighty will my perdition be? Mercy is Thy loveliest attribute; this gives Thee all Thy loveliness and completes Thy beauty."

Another prayer by the same suppliant is for "speedy sanctification":

"O God of ages! hear me speedily and grant my request while I am yet speaking: my frail existence will admit of no delay; answer me according to the shortness of my duration and the exigence of my circumstances. My business, of high importance as it is, yet is limited to the present now, the passing moment; for all the powers of earth cannot promise the next."

In the preface to this unique volume we are told that the author was "held in high esteem by the ingenious and the polite, notwithstanding the fact that these prayers are quite too insistent to be wholly courteous. Again, though the petitioner calls herself "a poor worthless creature," she yet argues it out with her Maker, like one attempting to make a dull mind see reason.

Compare with these importunate and perturbed orisons, the calm, sweet sanity of Stevenson's much-quoted prayer or Whittier's stanza:

“Drop Thy still dew of quietness
 Till all our strivings cease;
 Take from our souls the strain and stress,
 And let our ordered lives confess
 The beauty of Thy peace.”

In the same key of gentle trust and dignity are the well-known lines of Mr. Burroughs:

“Serene, I fold my hands and wait,
 Nor care for wind, nor tide, nor sea;
 I rave no more 'gainst Time or Fate,
 For lo! my own shall come to me.”

The acquiescent prayer commends itself by its simple trust and modesty. It does not dictate terms or time, but maintains a devout receptivity likely to win rarer gifts than any outlined by the vision of man. It finds its duplicate in the fearless faith of the daisy when she holds her chalice up to the heavens, all undisturbed by the fact that her sun-god is so many million miles away. The prayer of receptivity is the “lowly listening” of which Emerson speaks, and is quite foreign to the popular notion of prayer as a rite in which man does none of the listening.

Many of the influences of the *Zeitgeist* on prayer are too elusive to trace and define; but among those of which there can be little doubt are the silently vital changes wrought by the poets of all ages and climes. To the poet prayer is never a mere begging expedition, but an exalted receptivity which finds in God “a sweet, enveloping thought.” In this spiritual attitude every sense is quickened and extended to receive messages by a million lines of communication from the rose-tinted mountain-peak to the “meanest flower that grows.”

It was probably not while Coleridge was making any formal prayer that he grasped the celestial code of Mont Blanc:

“O dread and silent mount! I gazed upon thee
 Till thou, still present to the bodily sense,
 Did vanish from my thought; entranced in prayer
 I worshiped the Invisible alone.”

The poet is always a good listener; he lets the Holy Ghost seek him, as Thoreau said it was as much the business of the Holy Ghost as the seeker's. An obvious illustration of such seeking and finding is furnished by Bryant's “Forest Hymn”:

“That delicate forest flower,
With scented breath and look so like a smile,
Seems, as it issues from the shapeless mold,
An emanation of the indwelling Life,
A visible token of the upholding Love,
That are the soul of this great universe.”

To another poet the whisper came from a still humbler source:

“By so many roots as the marsh-grass sends in the sod
I will heartily lay me a-hold of the greatness of God.”

“Into every intelligence,” said Emerson, “there is a door which is never closed through which the Creator passes,” and one of the offices of prayer is to keep this door wide open. That it is much wider open in the souls of the best poets than it ever can be for those with unanointed eyes there can be no doubt. Through such a door “The Chambered Nautilus” flashed to Dr. Holmes the secret code of its celestial marconigram, while the woods, to Emerson, as to so many poets, continually whispered high secrets which they were commanded to reveal when the first forest was given leave to be:

“And when I am stretched beneath the pines,
Where the evening star so holy shines,
I laugh at the lore and the pride of man,
At the sophist schools and the learned clan;
For what are they all, in their high conceit,
When man with God in the bush may meet?”

It has been the poetic type of mind, too, which has helped to free prayer from its shackles of form and compulsory seasons. One reason given by Emerson for leaving the ministry was the irksome doubt whether he should always feel like praying at exactly eleven o'clock each Sunday morning, a doubt which as surely measured his sincerity as his later counsel, “When the devout motions of the soul come, yield to them heart and life, though they should clothe your God with shape and color. Leave your theory as Joseph his coat in the hand of the harlot and flee.”

Naturally, prayers must differ as men themselves do. It is therefore only fair to admit that while a general average of better prayers must result from the conception of a better God, there have been in all ages certain rare souls whose prayers were individually higher than the generation to which they belonged. When not in his vengeful moods, the

invocations of David, as illustrated in the Ninetieth and Ninety-first Psalms, need as little help from evolution as the perennial glory of the sea. Neither would one care to let a sometimes capricious *Zeitgeist* revise the rapt meditations of Isaiah and Job. Even the exalted reveries of such so-called pagans as Confucius and Marcus Aurelius have a self-proclaimed perfection with which even the cautious ages may not safely tamper. The Roman emperor may not have intended to give rules for prayer, but one of his paragraphs contains a suggestion which is charged with vital possibilities for those possessed with an inward eye. "Let your soul work in harmony with the universal intelligence," wrote the emperor, "as your breath does with the air. This correspondence is very practicable, for the *intelligent power lies open and pervious to your mind, as the air you breathe does to your lungs, if you can but draw it in.*"

"O Universe, I wish all that thou wishest" was one of the prayers of Marcus Aurelius. Of this petition Professor James said, "He who can truly say it, has a self from which every trace of negativeness and obstructiveness has been removed—no wind can blow except to fill its sails."

The Episcopal prayer-book is a later example of devotional expression so majestic and impressive that, like the Bible itself, it challenges the touch of evolution to mend without marring it; and evolution, like the beneficent law it is, has not accepted the challenge, but given its attention instead to prayers which could be mended. The same regenerating force which has resulted in pure-food laws has been testing religious weights and measures and pronouncing its *mene mene tekel* over vain repetitions and all adulterations of insincerity. Much of the so-called "prayerlessness" of our age is part of a revolt against spiritual cant and counterfeit. Rather than make a prayer in which he has no faith, the candid-eyed youth of to-day will not pray at all.

This, however, is only a phase of transition. Along with influences which pull up the flower in pulling up the weed, there have been other influences which have for many quickened and vitalized the idea of prayer. Modern electrical inventions, besides the first end they achieve, throw a secondary light on the mystical laws and possibilities of prayer. The telegraph, telephone, and wireless telegraphy have all extended the boundary of the possible so far beyond the stakes which once marked it that they inspire a still larger faith

which is no nebulous groping of anemic souls, but the robust conviction of logical minds.

Each one of the inventions mentioned is itself an example of marvelous fulfilment of the inventor's strong and persistent desire—his prayer, in other words. Unfortunately, to many, familiarity has veiled the miracles of electricity so that it is possible for some people to take down their receivers in Boston and talk with friends in Chicago without an inspiring throb of wonder. But some there are for whom "the visionary gleam" never wholly fades into the common light of day. It was by the light of such a gleam that Emerson saw electricity, and wrote of it:

"We had letters to send; couriers could not go fast enough. . . . But we found that the air and earth were full of electricity and always going our way—just the way we wanted to send. Would he take a message? *Just as lief as not*; had nothing else to do; would carry it in no time. Only one doubt occurred. . . . He had no visible pockets, no hands, not so much as a mouth, to carry a letter. But after much thought and many experiments we managed to meet the conditions, and to fold the letter up in such invisible, compact form as he could carry in those invisible pockets of his, never wrought by needles and thread—and it went like a charm."

When to the wonders of the telegraph and the telephone are added those of wireless telegraphy, the spiritual marconigrams of prayer should not seem so difficult:

When man to man may waft across the world
A swift-winged message on the vibrant air,
Shall rodent doubt still gnaw the roots of faith
To spoil its fair and fragrant blossom, prayer?

If patient men by subtle skill devise
Mysterious stations where their thoughts take flight,
Is God less wise, that haply He should miss
The orisons that wing the silent night?

The spiritual suggestions freed by every great chemical discovery should have the same tonic effect upon the faith of those having eyes to see and ears to hear. Finally, in the psychological investigations of the subconscious mind, the doors are opened into the very transmitting-room of prayer. By the light of such facts as are already acknowledged there is likely to be developed a more scientific form of prayer than the Occident has ever known, though the possibilities in this field have long been known to Oriental sages. How vitally the study of the subconscious mind may affect one's idea of prayer becomes clear as one reads well-authenticated sub-

liminal feats on record. When the psychologist admits that before going to sleep one may give an order to his subliminal self to wake him at a given hour and be confident that the command will be obeyed, as much more difficult ones have been, certain vaster inferences are justified. If the subconscious mind can do so much, it seems almost absurd to suppose that it can do no more.

How much more it has always been doing, the world does not know. How much more it might do, under deliberate and scientific direction of the objective mind, the world is only beginning to learn. A short time ago R. F. Foster, a writer on the staff of the *Sun*, told the public how he wrote his stories. Sitting in a comfortable position, he thinks about the characters of his tale, with certain scenes for a background. "While gazing fixedly at this mental picture," he writes, "think about nothing at all. Make your mind an absolute blank. . . . The fixity of the idea at the start has given the subconscious mind the suggestion. Give this subconscious mind a chance to expand it. . . . You must practise until you can make your mind an absolute blank for at least two minutes. . . . At the end of the silence, just take up your pen and write, and be thankful if you can use shorthand. Your story will simply write itself."

And, again, the value of this testimony lies in the vaster inferences to which it logically leads. Surely, if one may get so much from the subconscious mind, why should one conclude that it cannot do much more? What it does for us during sleep is, indeed, much more. While the conscious mind is off duty, its more occult partner watches over the delicately complex mechanism of the human body and gives it back to us in the morning so much refreshed and improved that one is forced to the conclusion that when there is any great undertaking under way the conscious mind would better call upon its silent partner and itself quit the premises.

Just this is probably what is done whenever, consciously or unconsciously, a poet or any other really creative writer has a "subliminal uprush." In fact, from such evidence of its powers as the subliminal mind has given us, it seems little else than our private inlet of Omniscience, or, to change the figure, a private line connecting us with the Great Central. Our conscious suggestion to the subconscious mind is thus like taking down our receiver which calls up Central.

From this point of view, holding the conception of our

subliminal self as an inlet of Omniscience in us, one gets a fresh light on scores of mystical passages in the Bible, like the one in Acts, "*Though he be not far from every one of us*"; and, again, "*In him we live and move and have our being.*" The wisdom of secular mystics also drops its veil confronted by this theory of the problem. When Eckhart said, "The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which he sees me," he was feeling the same truth expressed again by another writer, who said, "He is nearer than hands or feet."

If we think of our subconscious mind as the line connecting us with the Great Central, we shall no longer think of God as "Lord of all being *throned afar*," but as graciously close and accessible, and prayer may become as simple as taking down a receiver. Nor should this idea of the methods and possibilities of prayer seem less reverent than the one commonly held. If we make connections with secular Central, does it matter whether we take down the receiver with our right or left hand? What we see and learn with one eye is as legitimate knowledge as the findings of the other. The same is true of our pair of minds. And if we discover that one of the pair has a far greater power than the other, common sense would suggest that we should call upon that one for more things, instead of depending so exclusively upon its more finite partner.

Oriental sages claim that Christ fully understood the hidden powers of the subconscious mind, and hence used scientific methods in His prayers and in the performance of all His miracles. That our wonderful power-house should have been so long concealed from us should not perplex us. Men are still very childish or there would be no wars. Judicious parents do not give powder and matches to their children, and as long as the human race was very careless with all kinds of matches and all kinds of powder it could not be trusted with more dangerous secrets. All the world's discoveries have come slowly, that they might come safely. The discovery of dynamite in a more barbaric age might have left the globe uninhabited. Even now, one wonders whether it was not half a century too premature.

Wireless telegraphy, also, if understood some centuries ago, might have assisted the destruction of life instead of saving it. Fortunately, a kind of mental induration which resists changes, even for the better, has generally protected

the race from premature wisdom, and at the same time made a corduroy road for the discoverer and inventor. In proportion, too, as the field of investigation and experiment has changed through finer and finer material planes to the wholly invisible realm of mind, the discoverer is met with more and more doubt and distrust by the shut type of mind. Even when an invention has been preceded by one as clearly prophetic of itself as the telegraph was of the telephone, or the telephone of telepathy, the latter discovery is met with dull suspicion or grudging assent. In the religious world the same attitude of distrust and hostility has met every effort to let the full light of day shine upon the crepuscular findings of dogma and superstition. Religious faith has been regarded as something exempt from the law of change and growth. For this reason, chiefly, it has grown very slowly, checked in its possible enlargement by a fear of self-destruction.

As a result of the long-strained relations between the sacred and the secular, those of timorous mind naturally quake at the suggestion that their faith may be strengthened by psychological research and experiment, fearful that they may lose their way in the chilly fogs of metaphysics. But the fogs of metaphysics have begun to lift, and in the territory they once covered one may reconnoiter unafraid, finding data that will buttress his faith instead of toppling it over.

A great deal of material for such buttressing may be found in a recent volume of T. Troward's *Edinburgh Lectures on Mental Science*. Briefly stated, the purpose of these lectures is to prove that by the assistance of his subconscious mind a man may make his prayers effectual, as Christ declared they might be: "All things whatsoever ye pray and ask for, believe that ye *have* received them, and ye *shall* receive them." Mr. Troward writes:

"The difference of the tenses is remarkable. The speaker bids us first to believe that our desire has already been fulfilled, that it is a thing accomplished, and then its accomplishment will follow as a thing in the future. This is nothing else than a concise direction for making use of the creative power of thought by impressing upon the universal subjective mind the particular thing which we desire as an already existing fact. . . . We are thus planting a seed which, if left undisturbed, will infallibly germinate into external fruition.

"By thus making intelligent use of our subjective mind we, so to speak, create a nucleus, which is no sooner created than it begins to

exercise an attractive force, drawing to itself material of a like character with its own, and if this process is allowed to go on undisturbed it will continue until an external form corresponding to the nature of the nucleus comes out into manifestation on the plane of the objective and relative. This is the universal method of Nature on every plane. Some of the most advanced thinkers in modern physical science, in the endeavor to probe the great mystery of the first origin of the world, have postulated the formation of what they call 'vortex rings,' formed from infinitely fine primordial substance. They tell us that if such a ring be once formed on the minutest scale, and set rotating, then, since it would be moving in pure ether and subject to no friction, it must be, according to all known laws of physics, indestructible, and in its motion perpetual. Let two such rings approach each other, and by the law of attraction they would coalesce into a whole, and so on until manifested matter as we apprehend it with our external senses is at last formed. . . . As the vortex theory accounts for the formation of the inorganic world, so does biology account for the formation of the living organism. . . . All branches of physical science demonstrate the fact that every completed manifestation, of whatever kind and on whatever scale, is started by the establishment of a nucleus, infinitely small but endowed with unquenchable energy of attraction, causing it to steadily increase in power and definiteness of purpose, until the process of growth is completed and the matured form stands out as an accomplished fact. Now if this be the universal method of Nature, there is nothing unnatural in supposing that it must begin its operation at a stage further back than the formation of the material nucleus. . . . What is the force which originates the material nucleus? Let a recent work on physical science give us the answer: 'In its ultimate essence, energy may be incomprehensible by us except as an exhibition of the direct operation of that which we call Mind or Will.'—The quotation is from a course of lectures on 'Waves in Water, Air and Ether,' delivered in 1902, at the Royal Institute, by J. A. Fleming."

Mr. Troward continues:

"Here, then, is the testimony of physical science that the originating energy is Mind or Will. . . . Now the only action of Mind is Thought; by our thoughts we create the nucleus which attracts to itself its own correspondences in due order until the finished work is manifested on the external plane."

Throwing significant light upon the conclusions of the *Edinburgh Lectures* is a statement in one of the essays of Mr. John Burroughs: "When you have a thing in mind," he writes, "it is not long till you have it in hand." Illustrations of this fact nearly everybody could furnish from his experience, in the little happenings too hastily labeled as "coincidences" and straightway forgotten. But if one should keep a record of such coincidences, and examine them carefully, he might begin to doubt the correctness of his label. Then he might further test the composition of his

coincidences by deliberately holding something in mind to discover how long it would be before he would "have it in hand."

More explicit directions for those who care to make this experiment are found in the *Edinburgh Lectures* already mentioned. In passing, one is forced to admit that these lectures, admirable as they are, would gain a hundredfold in their printed form were they condensed and stripped of all their metaphysical phrases. The brevity of the recorded sayings of Christ should serve as an example to all His modern apostles. Moreover, a reader who does not sift these lectures very carefully is likely to be chilled by some of the chapters, which seem to reduce the Deity to a dry, impersonal Abstraction. Few people can make fervent and effectual prayers to a First Cause, or confide their aspirations and longings to "Universal Mind," or to "Cosmic Intelligence." For most of us prayer is vital only when in it is felt the warmth and intimacy of personal communion. That it may still keep this warmth and intimacy, though its method and scope be enlarged to vaster issues, is made clear in less metaphysical passages like the following:

"The Greatest Teacher of Mental Science the world has ever seen has laid down sufficiently plain rules for our guidance. With a knowledge of the subject whose depth can be appreciated only by those who have themselves some practical acquaintance with it, He bids His unlearned audiences, those common people who heard Him gladly, picture to themselves the Universal Mind as a benign Father, tenderly compassionate of all, and sending the common bounties of Nature alike on the evil and the good."

Before concluding, one would like to catch the ear of those who say, "What's the use of praying if the Almighty knows what is good for us?" and another class who regard prayer as an attempt to change the mind of the Creator, or an effort to break His laws.

Neither of these views apparently was held by the Author of the Lord's Prayer. Why?

If the best man the world has ever known found it advisable to pray, there must have been wise reasons for His belief and habit. Nor may we conclude that He attempted to break any laws. Effectual prayer cannot (and the other kind still less) go counter to law, but is effectual because it recognizes and avails itself of hidden laws already made, laws which were an open book to the Man of Nazareth.

The other question, "What is the use of praying if the Almighty knows what is good for us?" has such an accent of reason that it is the more misleading. But it may be answered by obvious facts in a parallel case. A young child does not need to ask its parents for the necessities of life. When childhood ends, however, he must in most cases ask, with all the compelling power of strong desire, for everything worth getting in life, including the achievement of character and the spiritual distinction which is its finest flower—a distinction which is one of the results of prayer.

"If he have not found his home in God, his manners, his forms of speech, the turn of his sentences, the build, shall I say, of all his opinions, will involuntarily confess it, let him brave it out how he will."

In harmony with this edict of our Concord Isaiah is the statement of the psychologist that "every thought has a physical reaction." On the kind of asking a man does will depend the quality of his manhood and his contribution to the world. If his unconscious prayer is solely for material things, he may discover too late how true it may sometimes be that "nothing fails like success."

The prayer of the materialist solely for material things is not only answered, but the deed of transfer is recorded on his face, as the deed is also recorded on the face of the man whose prayers have won him an inheritance in the Kingdom of Light.

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